

Committee on Resources

Full Committee

Testimony

**Testimony on the
Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1999 (H.R.701)
and the
Resources 2000 Act (H.R. 798)
before the
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Resources**

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Mr. Chairman, American Farmland Trust (AFT) appreciates this opportunity to provide your committee with our views on the merits of [H.R. 701](#) and [H.R. 798](#). I am Ralph Grossi, president of AFT and the managing partner of a family farm that has been in the dairy, cattle and grain business in northern California for over 100 years. American Farmland Trust is a national, non-profit organization with 31,000 members working to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment.

Mr. Chairman, I want to suggest that it is time that working with private landowners be the foundation of future conservation policy. H.R. 798 contains provisions that move us in that direction. American Farmland Trust supports the Resources 2000 Act because this bill recognizes the role that private landowners play in the stewardship of our natural resources, protecting their property rights, while compensating them for the environmental goods they produce for the public. We cannot support H.R. 701 at this time because it does not contain provisions that address the critical needs of farmers and ranchers.

My comments today will focus primarily on the specific provisions in H.R. 798 that direct conservation incentives toward private landowners. For the past quarter century conservation and environmental objectives in our country have been largely achieved by

either imposing regulations or through government purchase of private land. However, these actions have failed to resolve conflicts over important environmental problems - like species or farmland protection, for example - that rely on the participation of thousands of private landowners. At AFT we very strongly believe that in the 21st century new approaches to land conservation will be needed that address the concerns of private landowners.

The farmland protection provisions of the Resources 2000 Act recognize that America cannot - indeed should not - buy all the land that needs protecting. Instead it acknowledges that America's private landowners play a vital role in producing conservation benefits for all Americans to enjoy, and rightfully compensates them by providing \$150 million annually for the protection of America's best farmland, ranchland and forestland while leaving it in private ownership. I urge you to consider similar provisions for H.R. 701.

The easement acquisition, or purchase of development rights, approach proposed by H.R. 798 provides an innovative, voluntary opportunity for appropriate local agencies to work with landowners by offering them compensation to protect the most productive farmland - farmland that is critical to both the agricultural economic base of our rural and suburban communities and the environmental values provided by well-managed farms. It would also provide important matching funds to the many local and state efforts working to protect farmland.

Under the bill's provisions, protected lands would remain on the local tax rolls contributing to the local economy. The value of this approach to local communities should not be understated. AFT has conducted more than forty Cost of Community Services Studies around the country. In every case, these studies have shown farmland provides more property tax revenue than it demands in public services, while sprawling residential development almost always requires more in services than it pays in taxes.

Conservation policy does matter to farmers and ranchers, who are strong believers in individual freedom and private property rights. Their support for conservation policies is absolutely critical because they own the land that is at stake in the increasing competition for its use. But as competition for land has increased, so has disagreement over how to balance economic use with conservation of natural resources and the increasing demands being placed on private landowners to achieve objectives whose benefits accrue largely to the public. Debate over land use has focused on private property rights and the appropriate role of government in protecting resources while polarization on this issue has in many cases stalemated effective policymaking. Landowners often complain that

government regulations infringe on their freedom and force them to bear an unfair share of the cost of protecting the environment, while the public argues that landowners have a duty to conserve resources for future generations.

But the fact remains that for most landowners the equity in their land represents the hard work and savings of at least one if not numerous generations of the farm family. Their land is their 401(k)! As farmers we are proud of the abundant supply of food and fiber we have provided Americans and millions of others around the world; and we are pleased that we also "produce" scenic vistas, open spaces, wildlife habitat and watershed integrity for our communities to enjoy. And in many instances, our farms and ranches serve as crucial buffers around our parks, battlefields and other important resources. These are tangible environmental goods and services that farmers should be encouraged to produce and appropriately rewarded for. It is only fair that the cost of producing and maintaining these goods that benefit so many Americans be shared by them.

Farmers are the caretakers of the land, and voters are starting to realize this fact. The recent surge in local and state efforts to protect farmland suggests rapidly rising national concern over the loss of farmland and the environmental benefits it provides.

In last November's elections 72 percent of 240 initiatives to protect farmland and open space were approved by voters across the nation. In recent years Governors Engler, Voinovich, Ridge, Pataki, Wilson, Whitman, Weld, Glendening and others have supported or initiated farmland protection efforts to address this problem. Nearly every day this year major newspapers have carried articles about sprawl and "smart growth", frequently citing farmland protection as one of the key components of the latter. And the President highlighted the need to help communities protect "farmland and open space" in his State of the Union speech.

Recent studies by American Farmland Trust have documented that more than 80% of this nation's fruits, vegetables and dairy products are grown in metropolitan area counties or fast growing adjacent counties - in the path of sprawling development. And a 1997 AFT study found that over the past decade over 400,000 acres of prime and unique farmland were lost to urban uses each year. The loss of soil to asphalt -- like the loss of soil to wind and water erosion -- is an issue of national importance.

But one should not get caught up in the "numbers game". The fact is that every year we continue to squander some of this nation's most valuable farmland with the expectation that this land can be replaced with other land in this country or abroad, or with new technologies that promise to help maintain the productivity gains of the past half century.

The reality is that we don't know whether new technologies will keep pace. What we do know is that whatever those technologies will be, it is likely that they will be more efficiently applied on productive land than on marginal land where higher levels of energy, fertilizer, chemicals and labor per unit of output are required. Simply put, It is in the nation's best interest to keep the best land for farming as an insurance policy against the challenge of feeding an expanding population in the 21st century.

However, food security is not the reason farmland protection has emerged as a national issue. Communities all across the nation are working to protect farmland because it produces a lot more than food and fiber.

- **In many regions of the nation, enough farmland is being paved over to place the remaining farms at risk, due to the lack of a critical mass of land and services to support agriculture - farm machinery, supplies, marketing outlets, etc. Too often, while local leaders work to bring new business to a community they overlook agriculture as a true "wealth generator" - an industry that brings value to the community from renewable natural resources. In many traditional farm communities citizens are awakening to the prospect that this important, consistent economic base is at risk; and they recognize that one of the solutions is to ensure that the land base is protected. This calculus has little to do with the global food supply and everything to do with the value of farming to local economies.**
- **Residents increasingly frustrated with long commutes, deteriorating public services and a loss of the scenic views, watershed protection and wildlife habitat, that is so much a part of their quality of life, are among the strongest advocates for farmland protection. The working landscape around our cities adds value to the life and property of all the residents of a given community. And in some cases, farms that are far from the city add critical values; for example, the protection of farms hundreds of miles from New York City is helping improve the water quality and reduce water treatment costs for the residents of Manhattan.**

Increasingly, farmland protection is seen as an inexpensive way to protect scenic vistas that enhance the community for both residents and visitors while keeping the land in productive use on local tax roles. Farmers are "producing" a valuable product for their new suburban neighbors - environmental quality; and farmland protection programs such as purchase of development rights and the use of conservation easements proposed by H.R. 798 have become mechanisms to compensate them for these "products".

As more communities struggle with the problems of suburban sprawl, private lands protection is emerging as a key strategy of smart growth. The techniques proposed by the Resources 2000 Act add an element of fairness to the difficult challenge of achieving public goals while balancing private property rights, by providing a means of compensation for value received by the community at large. They are a reasonable balance to the regulations that often lack fairness when applied alone; and they are provisions that should be added to H.R. 701.

The findings of a recent AFT survey show that most landowners are willing to share the responsibility of protecting the environment with the public through "hybrid" programs that combine reasonable regulations with adequate financial incentives. The Resources 2000 Act helps to achieve this balance by adding carrots to the sticks of existing regulation.

This bill will help protect the working agricultural landscape of America, and do it in a manner that shares the responsibility of stewardship between private landowners and the public at large by fairly compensating for value received. The Resources 2000 Act is an excellent example of how to govern in a better way, a way that involves communities and local and State government, a way that empowers farmers rather than imposing on them.

Mr. Chairman, during this Congress you will have unprecedented opportunities to develop policies to encourage and reward stewardship on this nation's private lands; and to re-direct financial resources in a way that shares the cost of protecting our great natural resources between the taxpayers who enjoy them and the landowners that steward them. While it is not the

domain of this Committee, in closing I call your attention to the federal farm programs. At a time when the public is demanding more of private landowners every day, I ask you and all of Congress to consider a major shift of commodity support payments into conservation programs such as farmland protection that help farmers meet those demands in a way that is fair to all.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to working with you to establish a truly farmer-friendly conservation policy.

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